DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 476 CG 024 460

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TITLE Peer Consultation for Professional Counselors. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services, Ann Arbor, Mich.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CG-92-10
PUB DATE Dec 92
CONTRACT RI88062011
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC/CAPS, 2108 School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Consultants; *Counselor Performance; *Counselors; *Peer Relationship; Supervision; Supervisory Methods
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Peer Consultation (Supervision)

ABSTRACT

The importance of extensive, high-quality counseling supervision has become recognized as critical to learning, maintaining, and improving professional counseling skills. Peer consultation models offer counselors a viable adjunct or alternative experience to traditional approaches to counseling supervision. Research provides accumulating support for the value of peer consultation/supervision experiences for professional counselors.The Structured Peer Consultation Model (SPCM) was developed to provide counselors and counselor trainees with feedback and assistance in developing their counseling skills and implementing them effectively with clients. In SPCMs, peers work together in dyads to provide regular consultation for one another. Although SPCMs include many traditional supervision activities (goal setting, tape review, and case consultation), the emphasis is on helping each other to reach self-determined goals, rather than on evaluating each other's counseling performance. (ABL)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services

2108 School of Education
The University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1259

ERIC DIGEST

December 1992 EDO-CG-92-10

ED347476

CG024460

Peer Consultation for Professional Counselors

James M. Benshoff

Overview

The importance of extensive, high-quality counseling supervision has become recognized as critical to both learning, maintaining, and improving professional counseling skills. In counselor training, supervision is a required experience designed to help students integrate academic training with practical experience and self-examination of their individual counseling styles and strengths (Wagner & Smith, 1979). Once new counselors are graduated into the "real world" of working counselors, however, their access to *counseling* supervision is often much more restricted. Counselors may be the only counselor in a school or agency or may be in individual private practice. Even where supervision exists, the designated supervisor may be an administrator who may have little expertise or interest in supervising the counselor's work with clients. In work settings where a willing and qualified counseling supervisor is present, differences in personality, theoretical orientations, and time schedules may preclude adequate supervision.

Peer Consultation vs. Peer Supervision

Arrangements in which peers work together for mutual benefit are generally referred to in the literature as peer supervision. Peer *consultation*, however, may be a more appropriate descriptor for this process in which critical and supportive feedback is emphasized while evaluation is deemphasized. "If the therapist has the right to accept or reject the suggestions [of others], the model becomes, by definition, one of consultation rather than supervision" (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992, pp. 103-104). In this digest, "peer supervision" and "peer consultation" will be used interchangeably to describe similar nonhierarchical relationships in which participants have neither the power nor the purpose to evaluate one another's performance.

Peer Consultation Defined

Peer supervision/consultation (Benshoff, 1989; Remley, Benshoff, & Mowbray, 1987) has been proposed as a potentially effective approach to increasing the frequency and/or quality of supervision available to a counselor. Wagner and Smith (1979) defined peer supervision as a process through which counselors assist each other to become more effective and skillful helpers by using their relationships and professional skills with each other. Counselors can develop their own peer consultation relationships to fill a "supervision void" or to augment traditional supervision by providing a means of getting additional feedback from their peers.

Benefits of Peer Consultation

Peer consultation/supervision experiences can offer a number of benefits to counselors (Benshoff, 1989; Remley et al., 1987; Houts, 1980; Seligman, 1978; Spice & Spice, 1976; Wagner & Smith, 1979), including:

- Mutual, reciprocal benefits received through sharing in the peer supervision experience
- Ability to choose one's peer consultant and to determine one's own goals for the supervision process
- Decreased dependency on "expert" supervisors
- Increased skills and responsibility for assessing their own skills and those of their peers as well as for structuring their own professional growth
- Increased self-confidence, self-direction, and independence
- Development of consultation and supervision skills
- Lack of evaluation
- Use of peers as models.

Peer Supervision/Consultation Models

Although several peer supervision models have been proposed, not all of them are "peer" in the pure sense, since some incorporate expert leaders or supervisors in the process (e.g., Wagner & Smith, 1979). One significant approach to peer supervision is a triadic model proposed by Spice and Spice (1976). In this model, counselors work together in triads, rotating the roles of commentator, supervisee, and facilitator through successive peer supervision sessions.

The Structured Peer Consultation Model (SPCM; cf., Benshoff, 1992; 1989) is based on a model for peer supervision proposed by Remley et al. (1987). This model was developed to provide counselors and counselor trainees with additional feedback and assistance in developing their counseling skills and implementing them effectively with clients. SPCMs have been developed and implemented with a variety of counseling professionals, including counselor trainees, practicing school counselors, and counseling supervisors (Benshoff, 1991).

In the SPCMs, peers work together in dyads to provide regular *consultation* for one another (usually on a weekly or biweekly

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basis. The SPCMs include many traditional *supervision* activities such as goal-setting, tape review, and case consultation. In these models, however, the emphasis is on helping each other to reach self-determined goals, rather on *evaluating* each other's counseling performance. Other activities that are emphasized include discussion of counseling theoretical orientations, examination of individual approaches to working with clients, and exploration of relevant counseling issues. The SPCMs provide a clear and detailed structure which "walk counselors through" the peer consultation process. This structure is designed to keep peers focused on specific consultation tasks, yet also allow for modifications to fit individual needs and styles.

Research on Peer Consultation

A growing body of empirical evidence exists to support the potential contributions of peer consultation. As counselors gain skills and experience, they express a preference for collegial supervision relationships (Hansen, Robins, & Grimes, 1982). Seligman (1978) found that peer supervision helped to increase counselor trainees' levels of empathy, respect, genuineness, and concreteness. Wagner and Smith (1979) reported that counselor trainee participation in peer supervision resulted in greater self-confidence, increased self-direction, improved goal-setting and direction in counseling sessions, greater use of modeling as a teaching and learning technique, and increased mutual, cooperative participation in supervision sessions. Houts (1980) described participants in peer consultation teams as reporting greater feelings of professional competency and increased independence and autonomy.

Three studies have been conducted using the SPCMs. In one (Benshoff, 1992), participants overwhelmingly (86%) rated peer supervision as being very helpful to them in developing their counseling skills and techniques and deepening their understanding of counseling concepts. Two aspects of peer supervision were cited as being especially valuable: (1) feedback from peers about counseling approach or techniques, and (2) peer support and encouragement. Another study using an SPCM with counselor trainees (Benshoff, 1989) suggested that, while the model may be useful for counselor trainees regardless of level of counseling experience, participation in peer consultation may have a greater impact on factors such as self-confidence and comfort level (which were not assessed) than on actual counseling effectiveness. A third study, which examined the types of verbalizations used by peer consultants (beginning counselors), confirmed that peer consultants were, in fact, able to use basic helping skills to provide consultation to their colleagues. The most frequently used verbalizations (directives, closed questions, interpretation, minimal encouragers) seem consistent with the developmental level and skills of beginning counselors.

Conclusion

Peer consultation models offer counselors a viable adjunct or alternative experience to traditional approaches to counseling supervision. Research to date provides accumulating support for the value of peer consultation/supervision experiences for professional counselors. Future research needs and directions in this area include:

- identifying and implementing appropriate outcome measures
- utilizing multiple measures (both qualitative and quantitative) to assess the impact and contributions of peer consultation models
- comparing peer models to other supervision and consultation approaches
- developing appropriate research instruments and procedures.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education under contract number RI88062011. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.